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ABSTRACT

Historians of photography have failed to explore the origins of the Black Star Picture Agency and how it introduced experienced photojournalists to Henry Luce, a publisher attempting to break new ground in American journalism with the introduction of a picture magazine, "Life," in 1936. Black Star's founders, Ernest Mayer, Kurt Kornfeld, and Kurt Safranski, had nearly worldwide connections with contract photographers, and were well experienced in the operation of German mass circulation photo magazines, as well as the new techniques of photojournalism. They recognized the value of candid photography and the photo essay in presenting both the famous and the ordinary in routine situations. Mayer, Kornfeld and Safranski shared with the editors of "Life" their experience as business men and as editors, and encouraged them to use more photo essays produced by individual photographers rather than so many single photographs. The Black Star photographers who produced photographs for "Life," many of whom were talented Euroupean emigres, applied their knowledge of German photojournalism practices in their work, thus creating another channel through which ideas were carried across cultural boundaries. Eventually, many of the photographers became "Life" staff members or contract photographers for the decades in which the magazine flourished. (CRH)

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ABSTRACT

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THE HISTORY OF BLACK STAR PICTURE AGENCY:

LIFE's EUROPEAN CONNECTION

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ABSTRACT

By the middle of the 1930s, Henry Luce was considering a new publishing venture and a picture magazine was foremost in his plans. Several events and persons close to him influenced his decision to start LIFE in 1936, many of those already described in books and articles about the origins of this country's first picture magazine. However, a picture agency which was instrumental in LIFE's successful early years has been overlooked by historians of photography until now.

This paper details the origins of Black Star Picture Agency through a series of interviews with one of its co-founders, émigré Ernest Mayer, and several others associated with this New York City-based business. Mayer's first picture agency, Mauritius in Berlin, is described and compared to Black Star to show the similarities and differences in the practices of both German picture magazines and LIFE.

An important figure at Black Star was émigré Kurt Kornfeld, a partner of Mayer's who worked directly with Wilson Hicks at LIFE in getting candid photographs and photo essays published in this popular mass circulation magazine. Also contributing to the success of Black Star was émigré Kurt Safranski, the third co-founder who had been an accomplished editor at the Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung. The connections Mayer, Kornfeld and Safranski had with Europeans resulted in their representing numerous talented photographers, including Fritz Goro, Andreas Feininger, Philippe Halsman, Walter Sanders, Herbert Gehr, Fritz Henle, Ralph Crane and Werner Wolff. All these émigré photographers eventually were "stolen away" from Black Star by LIFE editors, many of them becoming staff members or contract photographeres for the decades the magazine flourished.

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Presented to the Visual Communication Division at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in Gainesville, Florida, August 7, 1984.

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The strides made by European photographers and the German illustrated magazines in the development of candid photography and the photo essay have been discussed earlier in presentations to the Visual Communication Division. That research is taken one step further in this paper by showing the conduit through which American publishers and editors in need of talented, trained European photographers hired those émigrés who were forced to leave their jobs and Germany because of Adolf Hitler. That important link was Black Star Picture Agency.

Black Star, which remains a thriving New York City picture agency to this day, was made possible, at least in part, by recommendations Kurt Korff made during his year (1935-36) as a consultant to Time Inc.[1] Korff, a former editor of the Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung, was an expert on what made the German magazine successful (the BIZ had nearly 2 million readers at its peak). When asked by Henry Luce for his recommendations about who should be hired for the upcoming LIFE, Korff strongly urged that "European-trained camera reporters" be hired because they brought a variety of skills to their work and were familiar with the candid style of photographing and the photo essay. Korff believed most American photographers working for newspapers were not as disciplined or versatile in their work.

In light of Korff's recommendation, Luce and his editors at Time Inc. needed reliable sources for photographic talent. As photographic historian William S. Johnson acknowledges:

> The growing need for a liaison between photographers and magazines in the late 1930s was met by photographic agencies, which kept large collections of photographs of possible stories on file, matched proposed stories with photographers, and handled direction and billing. Of the several agencies in operation at the time, Black Star was one of the best.[2] [emphasis added]

Picture agents were important middlemen in the magazine business. Few publishers could afford to have many staff photographers scattered throughout the United States and the world. Even on its second anniversary Life had just ten staff photographers, nine men and one woman. They could not possibly keep up with Life's demand for the approximately two hundred photographs selected for publication in each weekly issue. (Many additional assignments were shot for each issue but went unused.) From the beginning Life editors relied heavily on photographers associated with New York-based picture agencies.

Luce turned to Black Star very early. The agency not only had its own photographers under contract but also had contacts with "stringers" in geographically diversified areas, particularly in Europe. Also, Black Star served as a conduit for many émigrés fleeing Europe who wanted to pursue a career in photojournalism in the United States. These were professionals who had the kind of photographic talent vital to Luce's new magazine. Eight months before Life was ever published, Black Star signed a year-long contract to supply single photographs and photo essays for Time Inc.[3] The Black Star credit line appeared in the pages of Time even before the contract was signed, and beginning with the second issue (December 7, 1936), it also appeared regularly in Life.

Many of the agency's émigré photographers, including Fritz Goro, Andreas Feininger, Herbert Gehr, Walter Sanders, Fritz Henle, and Werner Wolff went on to become Life staff photographers, while others like Philippe Halsman were under contract to the magazine for decades. According to Wilson Hicks of Life, by 1952 more than a quarter of the photographers working for the magazine had emigrated to the United States from Europe in the late 1930s and early 1940s.[4] At least half of those European photographers were at one time associated with Black Star.

The history of Black Star and how it served as a channel for transfering innovative German picture magazine practices to Life is the focus of this paper. Studying the relationship which developed between the agents and magazine editors provides further evidence of the influence European photographers and picture agents had on American magazine photography in the 1930s and 1940s.

Unfortunately, there is very little published information on Black Star or the agency's relationship with Life.[5] The few secondary sources available are used to augment interviews conducted with the principal characters, such as Ernest Mayer, Howard Chapnick, and Edward K. Thompson.[6]

Black Star and Life

Daniel Longwell's final memo to Luce about Korff raised some nettlesome issues about Time Inc.'s wholly-owned subsidiary, Pictures Inc. This subsidiary was established to provide editors with unlimited access to news photographs from every available source. Longwell wanted to phase it out because it was expensive to run and it was cheaper to buy photographs from other agencies.[7]

By discouraging the continuation of Pictures Inc., Longwell opened the way for stronger relationships to develop between Life editors and picture agents like those at Black Star. Black Star's vital role in the late 1930s and 1940s is acknowledged by a Life picture bureau chief:

> In Life's dry run year, before we went to press, we discovered we needed Black Star more than they needed us. We needed their stories for our files, their contacts, their staff for assignments, and their pictures. As we got bigger we needed photographers of our own, so we got some of theirs--Ralph Crane, Andreas Feininger, Fritz Goro, Walt Sanders, Bill Ray, Burk Uzzle.8

However, the relationship was by no means one-way. Black Star needed Life as a client to survive. During the agency's early years, approximately a quarter of the business volume came from assignments for Life, according to Howard Chapnick, current president of Black Star. Photographers were anxious to see their work published in Life and Black Star offered Life experienced photographers familiar with the photo essay and candid photography. The two organizations found it very advantageous to work together.

Black Star agents also had one thing Life editors could not easily establish for themselves: long-standing relationships with photographers and editors who remained in Europe. Mayer, Kurt Safranski, and Kurt Kornfeld had contacts throughout the world, so the pool of talent they had to draw on for assignments was very diverse and well located. The agents were able to obtain exclusive rights to photographs shot by such accomplished photojournalists as Walter Bosshard, Wolfgang Weber, Dr. Paul Wolff, Younosuke Natori, Pierre Verger, and "Chim" (David Seymour).[9]

Before the United States entered World War II, Life editors also were very interested in the special arrangement Black Star had with "D.V." (Deutscher Verlag). Thanks to Safranski's source at this official German news agency, Black Star received packets of pictures of the German Army nearly every day in the mail. Life paid the agency a minimum guarantee of $1,800 for first refusal rights to these exclusive photographs. Scattered throughout the magazine's picture credits in the late 1930s are the words "D.V. from B.S."[10]

In turn, the magazine paid very well for the photographs it used, and devoted a considerable amount of space to series of photographs. Few magazines were able to give a photographer's work so much prominence, visibility, and recognition.

To appreciate why Black Star became such a critical link in the transfer of German picture magazine practices to Life, the operation of the German picture agency Mauritius, which preceded Black Star, must be explored. The connecting link between Black Star and Mauritius is Ernest Mayer.[11]

Mayer and Mauritius

While running Mauritius Mayer clearly developed the appreciation for photojournalism that made his American agency, Black Star, so important to Life. Founded in 1929 in Berlin, the Mauritius Publishing Company was an outgrowth of Mayer's decade of experience as a salesman in Berlin and Munich bookstores. In addition to publishing books, Mauritius sold photographs to German magazines such as the BIZ and the Münchner Illustrierte Presse, as well as to other European publications. At that time, although there were news agencies, very few journalistically-oriented picture agencies existed. In the highly competitive German picture magazine industry, Mayer found a good market for the photographs he solicited and collected.

As the magazine industry flourished, so did picture agencies and Mauritius faced stiff competition. Dephot, Keystone, Wide World, Weltrundschau, A.B.C., Hanke, and Pacific & Atlantic Press Association all competed for sales to the illustrated weeklies. Mayer, however, went beyond being a mere salesman. He generated many story ideas by clipping articles from regional newspapers, a practice he continued with great success at Black Star. According to Chapnick, Mayer "would arrive on Monday morning [at Black Star offices] with the entire Sunday New York Times cut into pieces for assessment of each item in terms of its possible picture-story ideas."[12]

Before sending a Mauritius photographer on an assignment, Mayer would discuss the idea with an editor to determine if a photo essay on that theme or topic would be of interest. Editors did not always agree to use a set of photographs, so some photographers worked on "speculation." However, this did not create many problems for Mayer since the magazine market in Germany was so competitive, with at least thirteen illustrated weekly magazines being published.[13] A photo essay rejected by one magazine usually could be sold to another magazine without much difficulty.

Picture agents in Germany were in a good position for another reason: since the illustrated magazines employed only a few "staff photographers" (like Martin Munkacsi at the BIZ), they had to rely upon picture agents like Mayer for a steady supply of material. In turn, Mayer and other agents provided freelance photographers with numerous "contacts" and clients and did the bookkeeping, tasks few photographers relished.

Mauritius "developed very nicely" during the early 1930s, according to Mayer. However, when Hitler became chancellor in 1933, life changed dramatically for Mayer and his countrymen: Jews were to be "excluded from all professions exerting an influence over German cultural life...(including) theater, films, radio, literature, and the arts...and—most important of all—the press."[14]

With his future so threatened, Mayer traveled to the United States in 1934, visiting distant relatives in New York City. While in America, he met with magazine editors, photographers, and other picture agents to discuss the current state of photojournalism and publishing. Sensing that the time was ripe for an American picture magazine and, therefore, a picture agency, Mayer chose to emigrate to the United States rather than to England, where he also had professional contacts.

Mayer's decision also was influenced by his friend Safranski, who had come to the United States in 1934 as director of the Hearst magazines. (Safranski produced a "dummy" of a picture magazine for Hearst similar to one produced by Kurt Korff at Time Inc.) Safranski wanted Mayer to join him in founding a picture agency.

> Safranski tried to give me an idea of the whole picture agency situation here in this country. What gave me the decision to come to the United States and not England was the fact I thought here there would be much wider possibilities of working, a much more open market, much newer field. I was very enthusiastic about Safranski's ability—the superiority of the German handling of photographs compared with the use in the United States. I saw, and I'm sure Safranski saw, that there was a wide field to work in and with a big chance to develop the business quickly and create something worthwhile, not just to make money.15 [emphasis added]

The visit to the United States, coupled with Safranski's desire to establish a picture agency, convinced Mayer to emigrate to New York when he was forced to sell Mauritius in 1935. Although it was difficult to find a buyer for his "Jewish" business, Mayer located a Swiss picture agent willing to pay him a "very modest sum" for it.[16]

Mayer moved to the United States in November 1935 at the age of forty-two, leaving behind his wife, Helene, and two daughters, Regina and Dorthea. He planned to bring his family to New York once he had established a business and saved enough for their fares. Unfortunately, Dorthea became ill, was refused treatment at a hospital because she was a Jew, and died March 29, 1936 in Berlin. Five months later Helene and seven-year-old Regina emigrated to New York City.

Although emigrating was traumatic, Mayer believes he and Safranski had much to offer American publishers interested in establishing a picture magazine. Their timing could not have been better, in spite of the fact they arrived during the Depression. "If we had come five years before, we

[Black Star] wouldn't have had the possibility to exist. The new ideas wouldn't have developed. It was just the right moment. If you study history, you will find that very often the best things are done in the worst of times," Mayer emphasizes.

Formation of Black Star

In early 1936 Mayer leased two rooms in the Graybar Building at 420 Lexington Avenue for six months without paying any rent. Many New York businesses had defaulted by late 1935, leaving so many offices vacant that landlords offered special arrangements just so buildings would be occupied. This rent-free arrangement allowed Mayer and Safranski half a year to build a clientele for their new picture agency.

The name "Black Star" was Safranski's idea. In Europe it was common for a company to have a logo or trademark—a symbol which stood for the company's name. All printers' boxes of type contained a star, and Safranski hoped it would become a quickly identifiable symbol. However, Americans did not pick up on the idea and few business associates ever used the simple black star.

A stroke of good fortune during his first year in the United States is one of Mayer's fondest memories of his adopted homeland. Fred Lewis, an American who worked for H. Armstrong Roberts Picture Agency in the same building, visited Mayer just a few weeks after Black Star opened its doors. Much to Mayer's surprise, Lewis appeared at the office with his arms full of maps and brochures, and a book of names, addresses, and phone numbers of editors and other professional "contacts" who might be interested in Black Star's pictures. Lewis later become a Black Star employee for several years.

According to Mayer, "Many of these small things happened to us. This was very encouraging. Of course, if you are thrown out of a country by the government, as we were in Germany, and you come to a new country where these nice things happen to you, it makes everything so much more pleasant and easier for years to come."

Americans like Fred Lewis helped Mayer get established, but Mayer helped himself by coming to the United States prepared to meet with publishers and editors. Like many other European refugees, he was unable to bring much money or many personal possessions to the United States, but he did bring along a large file of photographs. German and French photographers he knew through Mauritius, including Dr. Paul Wolff and Fritz Goro, gave Mayer permission to sell the reproduction rights to their photographs to American publications. Early in 1936 these photographs gave him an entree to see Longwell, who then was working with the new Time Inc. Experimental Department.

Longwell, very excited about the picture stories Mayer brought him, ran out of the room to show the photographs to someone else, possibly Luce. Upon returning, Longwell astonished Mayer by buying the reproduction rights to nearly everything he had with him. Longwell said he wanted to use the picture stories to show other Time Inc. editors the direction in which photojournalism was going. According to Mayer, Longwell was a man of vision, someone who knew photo essays and candid photography were the new trends in photography and publications.

It is not surprising that shortly thereafter Time Inc. offered Black Star a contract, marking the beginning of a long, successful business arrangement between the two companies. According to a contractual letter sent to Mayer on April 3, 1936, Time Inc. agreed to pay Black Star $5,000

for the next year in exchange for first refusal rights on photographs not taken "on a direct order from other publishers."[17] Time Inc. also received first refusal on all pictures imported by Black Star.[18] The $5,000 yearly fee was a guaranteed minimum, and Black Star's photographs could be used by any of the Time Inc. magazines. For example, thirteen Black Star photographs, including one four-picture essay, were published in eleven issues of Time from the start of the contract to the first issue of Life (March-November 1936).

The Black Star photographs in Time aroused at least one reader's attention, because the following letter to the editor from Grady Clay Jr. of Georgia appeared in the December 7, 1936 issue:

> In recent issues of TIME. . . and other outstanding magazines, there have appeared newsy, zestful photographs bearing the credit line "Wolff, from Black Star," "Preudy, from Black Star," etc. Could you describe the nature of this publication, "Black Star"?[19]

The editor explained that Black Star was a photographic and literary agency with "some 50 European, Asian, African photographers" and was "formed last December by Ernest Mayer, refugee German-Jewish publisher."[20]

Under this and subsequent contracts, Black Star photographers received the exposure they needed to get on with their careers in the United States. During Life's first two years, seven photographers—Fritz Goro (twice), Kurt Severin, Wolfgang Weber, Fritz Henle, Victor DePalma, Herbert Gehr, and Chim—were highlighted atop the column of picture credits.[21] This weekly feature focused on a photographer published in that particular issue and included the photographer's portrait and brief commentary.

An examination of the first two years of Life also reveals there were very few issues that did not contain the work of at least one Black Star photographer. In some cases the feature labeled "Photographic Essay" was

shot by a Black Star photographer such as Severin, Weber or Chim,[22] while on three occasions the magazine's cover was produced by a Black Star photographer.[23] In the fall of 1937 the work of Black Star photographers made up a major component of one issue of Life. The lead feature on the American Legion showcased the work of four of the agency's photographers (DePalma, Henle, Goro, and Robert Capa) in a six-page layout.[24] In this same issue, Black Star photographer Severin provided the photographs for a four-page spread "Life Goes to a Party" and was subject of the photographer profile at the back of the magazine.[25]

As the agency became established, it represented more photographers, including Americans like W. Eugene Smith, and Time and Life published Black Star work even more frequently. Nevertheless, it took ten years for the agency to become a financial success, according to Mayer. Happily, its influence on American publications came much more quickly.

The agency got off to a slow start financially because Mayer, Safranski and Kornfeld thought they could be literary as well as photographic agents, according to Mayer. Kornfeld had worked in Germany as a literary agent specializing in medical texts. However, none of them understood the language or American tastes well enough to act as middlemen for European writers such as Paul Claudel and Emil Ludwig seeking an American audience. After eighteen months, Black Star abandoned that phase of the company's operation.

Despite Mayer's attempts to fashion Black Star after Mauritius, he found that the two agencies were the "same in principle, but not in practice." Like Mauritius, Black Star serviced a variety of clients, including newspapers (New York Times), book publishers, and industry and advertisers

(Texaco and Esso). However, working with Time Inc. was most profitable and prestigious for Black Star and the photo essays the photographers liked to produce were best suited for a magazine format. Among Black Star's magazine clients, Life was the most desirable and comprised approximately a quarter of the agency's sales, according to Chapnick.[26]

Unlike the situation in Germany, Life did not have strong competitors in the picture magazine business. Thus, Black Star had limited options if Life was not interested in a story. Mayer and his partners did not consider their other major clients—Look, The Saturday Evening Post, Colliers, Newsweek, and Parade—in the same class as Life. Photographs suitable for Life might be too news oriented for magazines like Look or Colliers or the Post.

Mayer wanted to sell work to Life for several other reasons: it paid much more than the other magazines; it gave photographs much better "play;" and its weekly publication meant that timely material reached the newsstands quickly. Few magazines tried to compete with it on fast-breaking news. Once Life established itself, the magazine staff had a great deal of power. According to Mayer, it was common in the late 1930s for Life editors to display their casual arrogance by purchasing sets of photographs from Black Star even when they did not plan to publish them. This meant no other American magazine could use them, although Black Star could sell the same photographs to European magazines.

All three Black Star partners acted as picture agents, working with their own clients. Kornfeld was responsible for the agency's most important account, Life. Although he lacked Mayer's and Safranski's experience and understanding of the photography business, he soon became Black Star's best picture agent. His personality was everything, according to Howard

Chapnick: "When he went to Life it wasn't as if he was working for them and introducing his photographers, it was always as if they were working for him. He was a very courtly, gallant gentleman and very considerate of the people up there."[27]

Edward K. Thompson, Life's managing editor from 1949 until 1961, considers Kornfeld "the only honest picture agent in the business."[28] Natalie Kosek, Life's picture bureau chief for many years, attributed Black Star's "corporate glow" to him: "He really cared and he made you feel it. He knew they had a competitive business, but he endowed it with respect for the individual, for craftsmanship and quality, and when he came to sell you pictures you felt you were dealing with a friend, not a salesman."[29]

Loudon Wainwright of the latest Life speaks very highly of both Kornfeld and Black Star. In addition to their business relationship which "sort of ran itself," Wainwright and Kornfeld had a special personal relationship. Kornfeld was a "sweet, gentle, lovely man," according to Wainwright, who also said of the agency:

> Black Star's entree at Life was very good. We knew the photographers. The people that Black Star represented who we might use were no surprise to us. We knew what they could do and what we would like them to do. We felt they [the agents] had quality clients and that people like Kornfeld would never misrepresent anything. There was no salesmanship, no hustling involved. 30

Public perception of Safranski could hardly have been more different than that of Kornfeld. Mayer says Safranski was very gifted and knowledgeable, but his approach was to "teach" people—and Americans were not fond of being "taught."[31] Although he had much to offer American editors because of his "scholarly, aesthetic approach to photography,"[32] Safranski spent most of his time in the office, because he did not get along well with editors. He worked with photographers on story ideas and possible

approaches to a wide variety of assignments, serving primarily as the company's "idea man." Safranski also was considered a talented picture editor.

Safranski's reputation was based on his many years with Ullstein, where he began as a draftsman and art manager. While still in his late thirties he served as a highly successful manager of all the Ullstein magazines.

After the Nazis took over the Ullstein operations in 1933, Safranski emigrated to England where he met Richard E. Berlin and Tom White of the Hearst Corporation. They encouraged Safranski to move to New York City to help establish a new weekly picture magazine. He joined Hearst's organization, which at that time published newspapers and such magazines as Good Housekeeping, Harper's Bazaar, House Beautiful, Cosmopolitan, Town & Country, and McClure's.

At Safranski's recommendation, Korff was brought into the Hearst organization after serving as a consultant to Luce and the Experimental Department. However, "one fateful day, they [Korff and Safranski] were told the current financial and business conditions did not permit starting the new publication, which Safranski had estimated would require an investment of at least $1,500,000."[33]

Safranski and Korff were sorely disappointed not to have the opportunity to direct an American picture magazine.[34] The style they pioneered with Ullstein did, however, influence the direction of Life. Safranski was considered by Herman Ullstein to be "an artist of faultless taste, with an extraordinary flair for publishing, full of good ideas,"[35] Although he was unable to find an American publisher willing to hire him as an editor, his reputation attracted emigre photographers who wanted to work with him at

Black Star and their ideas and photographic style significantly influenced American magazine photography.

The European photographers who fled Nazi Germany and came to the United States in the late 1930s and early 1940s were attracted to Safranski and Black Star for several reasons. In Europe they had become accustomed to considerable freedom as freelancers, funneling their work through several photographic agencies. Photographers depended on the agencies to direct their work to the best magazines and to scure the best prices. They wanted the agencies to handle all the business aspects, including pricing, billing, collecting, bookkeeping, and accounting. Black Star was organized on this same European model.

As these émigré photographers established a successful relationship with Black Star, they encouraged others to join the agency. Herbert Gehr, for example, told Ralph Crane he would find Black Star a good agency to work with.[36] Crane, in turn, became one of the agency's greatest boosters. Black Star prospered from the "networking" that resulted.

Of course, other New York picture agencies may have wanted to represent the best of these émigré photographers, but Black Star was more successful in doing so for several reasons:

(1) The agency was managed by fellow émigrés, reducing possible language problems and generally helping ease their entry into American life.

(2) Mayer, Kornfeld, and Safranski had been very successful businessmen in Germany with influential contacts in the United States even before they emigrated. They maintained their professional contacts in Germany after arriving in America. One benefit was Black Star's ability to obtain exclusive photographs of the German army in action prior to America's involvement in World War II.

(3) Unlike most photo agencies, which paid photographers only after their work had been sold, Black Star paid a weekly retainer against an agreed percentage of a photographer's total annual sales. Black Star usually took a thirty to forty percent commission, according to Mayer. (Photographer Goro remembers the commission to be fifty percent.)

Contracts with photographers ranged from a few months to a full year. Many photographers stayed with Black Star only long enough to fulfill their first contract. Others, like Gene Smith and Crane, were represented by the agency for many years, even though Life was the primary outlet for their photographs.

Crane stayed with Black Star from 1941 to 1951 because of the excellent personal and professional relationships he had. His experience with the agency showed why Black Star could attract fine photojournalists. On a professional level, Crane says, Black Star helped him "tremendously by supplying excellent ideas for picture stories and did a great job in selling them. About eighty percent of these stories were well sold."[37] In his praise for Kornfeld, Safranski and Mayer, Crane says the "team was about the best I have ever seen in any outfit. I am really grateful for everything they did for me. In fact that is one reason I stayed almost 10 years with them even though I had the possibility to join the [Life] staff much earlier than I did."[38]

Supplying ideas for picture stories was something Black Star agents did well at Life, according to Crane. However, at first it was easier to sell single images than photo essays. American editors were less experienced than those in Germany, and did not always realize the potential of a story. "We were forced—more or less—to sell single pictures at first since this was what the people wanted," Mayer admits.

However, Kornfeld was quite a salesman, and slowly he educated the editors at Life. Black Star's greatest task, according to Mayer, was to introduce the idea of the photo essay to editors because there were no American models to point to. Although the agents did not consider themselves "missionaries," they were determined to be successful businessmen and felt that acceptance of this new approach to magazine photography was essential.

To sell this new approach, Kornfeld was not afraid to do battle with Wilson Hicks, Life's picture editor, who was moody and often difficult to deal with. They had a very explosive relationship and would disagree vigorously during their regular meetings. Sometimes Kornfeld and Hicks argued over the price of photographs while other times the argument would be of a more substantive nature. "They would scream at each other and they would literally pound the table...and they would go at it, but I think Life realized the value of Black Star and the photographers that Black Star had," according to Chapnick.[39]

Although these arguments did not really strain the relationship between Black Star and Life, another situation did. The "stealing away" of agency photographers to work directly for the picture magazine upset Kornfeld, Mayer and Safranski. Thanks to Black Star, Hicks and the others had the opportunity to become acquainted with a photographer and his ability to produce good work. After a photographer proved himself, the managing editor encouraged him to work directly for the magazine, thus avoiding the agency commission. Editors who did not like a particular Black Star photographer's work were under no obligation to add him to the Life staff. That photographer could stay with the agency or join another magazine staff.

Many émigrés proved during their "apprenticeship" at Black Star they had the qualities of a good magazine photographer: physical stamina, versatility, technical expertise, journalistic skill in handling story ideas, and the ability to deal with people.[40] Life editors wanted these qualities in its photographers. Thus, it was not surprising that photographers such as Goro, Feininger, Gehr, Sanders, Henle, Wolff, Halsman, Smith, Ernest Haas, Charles Steinheimer, Burk Uzzle, Vories Fisher, and Bill Ray left Black Star for Life. Their decisions, however, were not solely based on monetary considerations. To be a Life photographer was very prestigious, a factor which Mayer and his partners could not counter. Other picture agencies found themselves in the same position as Black Star when it came to having photographers "stolen away" by Life editors. Pix Inc. lost Alfred Eisenstaedt, Nina Leen, Cornell Capa, George Karger, Erich Schaal, and Albert Fenn, to Life after providing the magazine with their work for a "test period."

As in Germany, as the American picture magazine industry grew, so did the number of picture agencies. In the late 1930s and early 1940s agencies such as Wide World, Underwood & Underwood, Acme, Keystone, and International received credit lines in Life, but Pix competed most directly with Black Star, according to Mayer and Chapnick. (Magnum, an agency founded in 1947 as a photographers' cooperative, was very competitive with Black Star in the 1950s and 1960s.)

Like Black Star, Pix was founded in 1936 in New York City by a German emigre, Leon Daniel. Daniel, too, gained considerable experience in the picture selling business in Europe, thus creating "stiff competition" for the agency, according to picture agent Franz Furst, who worked at Pix for many years.[41] In remembering the picture agency business of the late

1930s, Furst said, "Life needed badly all the photographers who came in from the boats. Life had a tremendous need for this type of photography, for anyone who was trained on the BIZ. It was a big time for the American awakening to photojournalism."[42]

Furst acknowledges that talented émigré photographers were attracted to Black Star and Pix because both agencies were owned and operated by fellow Europeans. However, once the émigrés established a reputation in New York City and were accustomed to their new homeland, they no longer needed picture agents. This was a "danger" of the agency business, according to Furst.[43] Nevertheless, both Black Star and its rival, Pix, served a critical role as conduits for the work of experienced, European-trained photographers.

Conclusions

Historians have failed to explore the origins of Black Star Picture Agency and how during its early years it introduced experienced photojournalists to a publisher attempting to break new ground in American journalism. Primary and secondary sources indicate the men who ran Black Star were well acquainted with the operation of the German mass circulation picture magazines. They recognized the value of candid photography and the photo essay in presenting both the famous and the ordinary in routine situations. Mayer, Safranski, and Kornfeld shared with the editors at Life their experience as businessmen and as editors. They encouraged Life editors to use more photo essays produced by individual photographers rather than so many single photographs. The Black Star photographers who produced photographs for Life, in turn, applied their knowledge of German photojournalistic practices in their work, thus creating another channel through which these ideas were carried across cultural boundaries.

FOOTNOTES

1 See: C. Zoe Smith, "Émigré Contributions to Life: The German Influence in the Development of America's First Picture Magazine," a paper presented to the History Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, annual convention, Athens, OH, July 26, 1982.

2 William S. Johnson, ed. W. Eugene Smith: Master of the Photographic Essay (New York: Aperture, 1981): 6.

3 Daniel Longwell, contractual letter to Ernest Mayer, 3 April 1936, Time Inc. Archive, Time-Life Building, New York, NY.

4 Wilson Hicks, Words and Pictures (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952): p. 87.

5 Two computer searches, one in 1977 and the other in 1983, of a variety of literature bases came up with only one published article on Black Star. It should also be noted that records and files from the agency's early years were destroyed when Mayer moved to his current home in Riverdale, NY. Unfortunately, he no longer had space to house them.

6 Undocumented quotes from these individuals used in this paper are taken from the interviews I conducted with them unless otherwise noted.

7 Daniel Longwell, office memorandum to Henry Luce, 5 January 1937, Time Inc. Archive, Time-Life Building, New York, NY.

8 Dorothy S. Gelatt, "Inside Black Star," Popular Photography (March 1968): 97.

9 See the picture credits listing in the following Life issues: 7 December 1936, 21 December 1936, 28 December 1936, 26 April 1937, 3 May 1937, 10 May 1937, 17 May 1937, 7 June 1937, 21 June 1937, 19 July 1937, 9 August 1937, 30 August 1937, 6 September 1937, 13 September 1937, 18 October 1937, 29 November 1937, 6 December 1937, 20 December 1937, 27 December 1937, 24 January 1938, 14 February 1938, 28 February 1938, 28 March 1938, 4 April 1938, 16 May 1938, 17 October 1938, 31 October 1938, 7 November 1938, 28 November 1938, 13 February 1939, and 20 February 1939.

10 See the picture credits listing in the following Life issues: 28 March 1938, 23 May 1938, 10 October 1938, 31 October 1938, and 14 November 1938.

11 Interviews were conducted with Ernest Mayer at his home in Riverdale, NY on 22 May 1978, 3 January 1979, 13 May 1979, and 19 November 1979.

12 Howard Chapnick, interview in his office in New York, NY, 23 May 1978.

13

Following in the footsteps of the BIZ and MIP were numerous weekly picture magazines, including Kölnische Illustrierte, Hackebeil, Frankfurter Illustrierte, Hamburger Illustrierte, and Stuttgarter Illustrierte, Die Woche, Weltspiegel (Sunday supplement of the Berliner Tegeblatt), Die Dame, Die Koralle, and Beyers für Alle in Leipzig. See Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, A Concise History of Photography (New York: Grosett and Dunlap, 1965): p. 250.

14

Herman Ullstein, The Rise and Fall of the House of Ullstein (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943): p. 27.

15

Mayer interview, 22 May 1978, op. cit.

16

Mayer interview, 22 May 1978, op. cit. The new owner was unable to make a go of it and quit the picture agency business a short time later.

17

Longwell, contractural letter to Mayer, op. cit.

18

Ibid.

19

Letter to the editor, Time 28 (7 December 1936): 8.

20

Ibid.

21

See the following issues of Life: 13 September 1937, p. 104; 4 October 1937, p. 116; 18 October 1937, p. 110; 25 October 1937, p. 112; 8 November 1938, p. 112; 9 May 1938, p. 110; 5 September 1938, p. 9; and 28 November 1938, p. 68.

22

See the following issues of Life: 18 October 1937, p. 43; 1 November 1937, p. 42; and 28 November 1938, p. 48.

23

See the following Life covers: 6 December 1937; 28 March 1938; and 5 September 1938. Munkacsi produced the 18 April 1938 cover as well.

24

See Life, 4 October 1937, pp23-28.

25

Ibid., pp120-4.

26

Casey Allen, "Behind the Scenes: An Interview with Howard Chapnick," Camera 35 (December 1979): 55.

27

Chapnick interview, op. cit.

28

Edward K. Thompson, interview in his office in Washington, DC, 23 November 1979.

29

Kosek as quoted in Gelatt, op. cit.

30 Loudon Wainwright, interview in his office in New York, NY, 8 May 1979.

31 Mayer, 3 January 1979, op. cit.

32 Chapnick interview, op. cit.

33 Ullstein, op. cit., p. 89.

34 Mayer interview, 3 January 1979, op. cit.

35 Ullstein, op. cit., p. 89.

36 Ralph Crane, letter from Geneva, Switzerland, 20 August, 1979.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Chapnick interview, op. cit.

40 John R. Whiting, Photography is a Language (New York: Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 1946): p. 102.

41 Franz Furst, interview in his home in New York, NY, 19 November 1979.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.